



# Pick Your Path to Health

## Eating Right — A Simple Approach

Eating right is simple enough. It means choosing a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and high in vegetables, fruit and calcium. It means staying away from beverages and foods that are high in sugar or salt. And it means, if you do drink alcoholic beverages, to do so in moderation.

It's not all that complicated, and the health benefits are plenty. Still one in five Americans chooses a not-so-healthy meal at a fast-food restaurant every day, according to the National Women's Health Information Web site, and more than one-half of Americans are overweight.

Whether you are 5 or 95, at an ideal weight or in need of significant weight loss, eating right is one of the most important steps you can take to improve your overall health and reduce the likelihood for disease.

### What should I be eating?

According to the food pyramid, developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the basis of a healthy diet is the consumption of grains, fruits, and vegetables. Rice, pasta, tortillas, or whole grain bread are great places to start. From there, add plenty of fruits (at least two servings each day) and vegetables (at least three servings each day) and some low-fat foods from the milk, meat, and beans group. Fish, lean poultry, other lean meats, and beans are healthy alternatives to red meat or fried or fatty meats. Of course, low-fat or no-fat milk and cheese always take the prize over their higher fat substitutes.

Remember to keep food portions small. Celia Maxwell, M.D., Assistant Vice President for Health Affairs at Howard University, recommends that people eat meals from a salad plate, as opposed to the traditional dinner plate. "You can trick your mind into seeing a lot more food when it's on a salad plate," Maxwell advises.

Also be sure to read labels-many items sold as single portions (e.g., a bag of potato chips, a 12-ounce steak, or a 20-ounce container of soft drink) actually provide two servings or more. And when you eat out, choose small portion sizes, share a large entrée with a friend, or take home a portion of the meal. Don't be afraid to leave food on your plate!

## **Three Meals At-A-Glance**

"I tell my patients that breakfast is the most important meal of the day," says Maxwell. "It's important because it sets the tone for the rest of the day."

"If the breakfast includes a lot of fiber and grain," Maxwell continues, "the person will be less hungry through the rest of the day. He or she will tend to snack less and perform better."

People need to reverse their approaches to lunch and dinner, Maxwell emphasizes. "For lunch, the person should have the equivalent to what would normally be thought of as a dinner. Lunch should include protein, maybe in the form of a meat. It should also include vegetables and maybe even a dessert."

Maxwell explains that you want to eat most of your calories when you're more likely to be active-and since lunchtime is the middle of the day, this is a great place to indulge. "If you eat all those calories at dinner, spend the next couple of hours in front of the TV, and then go to bed, it's a formula for gaining weight," Maxwell says.

Dinner, in contrast, should be a lighter meal, like that of a traditional "lunch," Maxwell explains.

## **What about donuts?**

When you are trying to muster the resistance you need to pass up a chocolate donut in favor of a piece of fruit, remember these facts:

- A good diet reduces your risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, certain types of cancer, diabetes, stroke, and osteoporosis.
- Eating right can help reduce the risk for developing obesity, high blood pressure, and high blood cholesterol (major risk factors that can lead to the chronic diseases listed above).
- Your energy level and overall sense of well being are tied to healthy eating.
- Say no to at least one food temptation each day, and you will soon be happier about the way you look and feel.

## **Women's Needs**

Women's nutritional needs are unique and vary during different stages of life. Women need more calcium, iron, and folic acid, than do men, and as women age their metabolism slows down, requiring them to eat fewer empty calories and exercise more regularly.

Women who are planning a pregnancy must be particularly attuned to the need for folic acid, which protects fetuses from serious birth defects. (Green, leafy vegetables, citrus fruits, and folic acid-fortified bread and cereal are good sources of this "must have" nutrient.)

Eating well is one of the most basic steps you can take to improve your health. The food we eat affects everything from our risk for disease to our energy level and overall strength and well being. And remember if you're pregnant, or thinking about becoming pregnant, what you eat affects you and baby. The benefits of eating well last a lifetime, so start now. Grab an apple and start on the path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at [www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov).*